

From the General Officer Commanding in Natal
to the Secretary of State for War.
(Through the Field-Marshal Commanding the
Forces in South Africa.)

Newcastle, Natal,

SIR,
4th June, 1900.

In my letter of the 24th ultimo, I reported that on reaching Laing's Nek on the 19th, I found it too strongly occupied for me to force it with the troops then at my disposal.

2. I have since ascertained that the Wakkerstrom Commando, which had left the force opposing Lord Robert's advance, reached Laing's Nek just in time to rally sufficient of the fugitives I was pursuing to stop our pursuit.

3. For the next few days the enemy were able to concentrate on and about Laing's Nek quicker than I could bring my force forward, and on the 28th I calculated that they had about 8,000 men distributed in very strong positions in Keteni Nek, Laing's Nek, Moll's Nek, and the defiles of the Utrecht—Wakkerstrom road, with some 13 to 15 guns in well-selected positions, while some 6,000 Free Staters were in the north-east corner of the Free State, of whom at least 3,000 were holding Botha's Pass and the tracks adjoining it on my left.

4. On the 28th May I sent a force under General Hildyard across the Buffalo at Wool's Drift with instructions to march on Utrecht, and another under General Lyttelton at Ichanga Drift, with orders to turn south and clear the Dornberg, which was at the time held by the enemy in some force.

5. The enemy evacuated the Dornberg on General Lyttelton crossing the Buffalo River, and he then turned north and came up on the left flank of General Hildyard, who, on the 29th, had occupied the Belelas Berg, south and in front of the town of Utrecht.

Commandant Grobelaar, who was commanding the 1,500 men holding the Wakkerstrom—Utrecht road, withdrew from the town, giving a promise that no armed men should enter the town while we were there. On the following day, the Landrost surrendered the town, had several copies of attached proclamation posted, and asked for more for distribution.

6. On the 30th May, I heard that Lord Roberts had occupied Elandsfontein Junction, and I at once sent a flag of truce to the Commandant at Laing's Nek, asking him, now his communications were cut, whether it was worth his while to continue the struggle. He replied that he had referred the question to his Commandant-General.

7. On the 2nd June, I met Assistant Commandant-General Chris. Botha between our outposts. I attach notes of the conversation that ensued. I may add that my Staff elicited from his Staff that at least half the burghers are anxious for peace, that they have telegraphic communication with Lydenburg through Standerton and Middelburg, and that their supplies also now come by wagons by the same route.

8. With regard to the terms I offered the troops on Laing's Nek, viz., that their homes should be unmolested, provided they now dispersed, taking their small-arms but leaving their artillery, I may mention that even if I attack and take the position, I cannot hope to get any result better than these terms involve. The position admits of such facilities for escape that I cannot hope to make any prisoners, or indeed capture many guns, and I reserved the right of further disarmament.

In these circumstances, should my terms be accepted (though this is I fear unlikely), I shall

have obtained the occupation of Laing's Nek without loss of life and without prejudice to our position.

I have, &c.,
REDVERS BULLER, General.

Notes on interview between Sir Redvers Buller and Assistant Commandant-General C. Botha, near Laing's Nek, 2nd June, 1900.

Sir R. Buller told Botha that he had asked him to meet him with a view to avoid, if possible, the useless sacrifice of brave lives. Lord Roberts was in Johannesburg. There was a large army with many guns in Natal, and he hoped Botha would see that to go on fighting here was only throwing lives away to no purpose.

Commandant Botha asked Sir Redvers to give him his proposals in writing so that he could lay them before his Government. He cannot take upon himself not to fight any more; if he did so he would be a traitor to his country.

Sir R. Buller replied that Botha had received, four days ago, a letter laying the case before him.

Commandant Botha admitted that he did receive Sir Redvers' letter, but the information given in it was not so definite as this conversation was.

Sir R. Buller said that he had stopped all firing since he sent the letter, but in the meantime the Boers had gone on digging trenches. This state of things cannot continue.

Commandant Botha replied that he also had not fired. He then asked Sir Redvers to make a proposal.

Sir R. Buller said he expected the proposal from Botha. He had done the best he could, but he cannot wait long, and he understands that the Boer Government has moved to Lydenburg.

Commandant Botha said he had no proposition to make.

Sir R. Buller said he hates war—it is a miserable thing. A brave man knows when the time comes when to continue fighting means only useless loss of life, and slaughter.

Commandant Botha said it was not for him but for his Government to decide such a question.

Sir R. Buller said he had not asked Lord Roberts about it; but he had many friends in the force opposed to him, and he wished them well. He has so many men that Botha must see it is useless to go on fighting.

Commandant Botha said if he gave in now, Sir Redvers would have a big advantage and he would have great loss.

Sir R. Buller said that on the contrary if war goes on, the Boers' stock would be lost, their homes destroyed, and their property would suffer a great deal of damage, and he wants to avoid that.

Commandant Botha replied that all they have to fight for is their independence. Their stock, &c., is only a secondary consideration to them.

Sir R. Buller said "But behind independence is life."

Commandant Botha said he would deserve to be hated by his country if he gave in.

Sir R. Buller said that the Boer Government has been telling the burghers that the English wish to destroy their farms. This is not true.

Commandant Botha said he knows it is not true, and that it is only a rumour and a fiction.

Sir R. Buller said that he was afraid that there was nothing more to be said, and if Botha must go on fighting it could not be helped.

Commandant Botha replied, "If it has to be,